

Dragon Ball Super Z Episode 3: Just Another Day

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Summary: Vegeta wasn't always a good guy. Most have forgotten his galactic reign of terror, but some have longer memories.

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**Dragon Ball Super Z

> Episode Three
 Just Another Day

> Juuhachi-gou and Mirai Bulma**

>

Prologue

> "There's Life Underground"<p>

_I feel it all around, I feel it in my bones

> My life is on the line when I'm away from home
 When I step out the door the jungle is alive

> I do not trust my ears I don't believe my eyes
 I will not fall in love I cannot risk the bet

> Cause hearts are fragile toys so easy to forget_

The elder brought out the cash and handed it over to the waiting hands. He and the others watched anxiously as the recipient counted it, hoping that it was enough. It'd been hard, so very hard, to scrape the money together. Things were hard, had been hard for years. Ever since their home was destroyed, nothing had quite gone right. Most of the ones who'd escaped were here, but not all, and each face that wasn't among their number any more only made the pain renew itself.

At last the counting was done. Slowly an armored head nodded. "It's enough," a voice said, made hollow by the helmet. "Well, to tell you the truth, it's a little light, but I can make it stretch. I can see

there's no use asking you for more, and you're this close. I can cut you some slack."

The elder nodded, his grim expression lightening, and a murmur of relief swept the group. "Do you need a description?"

"Not necessary." Behind the mirrored faceplate, a thin grin appeared and disappeared. "Trust me, we've heard of this particular problem before. It's just that no one yet has managed to come up with the price of a solution. Our solution, that is. But for the record, I do need you to state exactly the terms you're hiring me under, for transmittal to my headquarters, so the contract can be finalized."

The elder nodded again. "My name is Tena, and I'm one of the Elders of the Council that rules what's left of our people. I and the other Council members here were selected by our people to employ your services to serve justice on the person responsible for the destruction of our world, Shimo, and the near-extinction of our people, the Shimo-jin. We want retribution...We want revenge!"

"And this person's name is-?"

"Vegeta. Prince Vegeta of the Saiyajin."

Part One

> "Murder in the Air"<p>

_It's just another day, there's murder in the air
> It drags me when I walk I smell it everywhere
 It's just another day where people cling to light
> To drive away the fear that comes with every night_

"YAAAAAAA!"

Piccolo didn't even open his eyes. He simply straightened up and sidestepped at the last second, letting the screaming form shoot past him, then whirled and fired a ki blast in his assailant's direction. He missed, of course, but by that time he'd swept off his turban and cloak and taken a defensive posture, smirking. "Gotta do better than that to catch me off guard."

"How's this?" Gohan banked in a neat hairpin turn and rocketed back up at the Namekseijin, arms spreading wide. As Piccolo ducked, Gohan executed a mid-air handstand and snagged his mentor's shoulders, dragging him up into the air for a huge and exuberant hug. "Taaaaaaag you're it, Piccolo-san!" he caroled, laughing.

"Gyaahhh get off of me!" Grabbing Gohan's arms in turn, Piccolo judo-flipped him to the ground, then flew down and grabbed the young man in a headlock. "Now who's got who. Huh, kid?"

"_Temaе na yuzuru_," Gohan panted, still laughing. "I give up!"

"You better, before I get rough with you." Piccolo let go, but not before he scuffed a hand through Gohan's hair. Not that it made much difference; as soon as the fingers passed the short locks settled

back into their accustomed pattern. "Not too bad. You got within 500 yards of me before I knew you were there. Been practicing masking your ki again?"

"_Hai_." Gohan leaned back. "_Tou-san_ says it's useful."

"Yeah, well... he's got a point. There are times you don't want to advertise where you are to anyone with half the wits Kami gave 'em." Piccolo looked at Gohan thoughtfully. "You feeling okay? No more bad nights over Bardock?"

"Hm? --Oh... _hai_." Gohan looked down, plucking at a blade of grass. "I... I think I'm mostly over it, Piccolo-san. It was pretty bad at first, but six months makes a big difference."

"Getting your body taken away from you isn't real easy to deal with. You did good, fighting him off."

"I just wish..." Gohan's voice trailed off to almost a whisper. "I wish I'd been able to stop him before he hurt you."

"I survived, didn't I? Quit knocking yourself in the head for it, Gohan. It might've been your hands, but it wasn't your decision. Don't you think I'm smart enough to understand that?" Without hesitation, the Namekseijin put a hand to the other's shoulder. "You and me, kid, we've been through too much for that. So forget it."

"_Hai_. I wanted to tell you I was sorry before, but you've been pretty hard to find."

"Yeah, I've been spending a lot of time up in Heaven with Dende. Teaching him a few things. Matter of fact, I'm gonna be headed up that way again tomorrow morning."

"_Sou ka_? How come?"

"Well, you know that when I died Kami did too. The old Kami, I mean. So Dende was chosen as his replacement, and Kami and I fused into one being again. But Dende didn't get much of a chance to learn the God business, so I've been showing him what he can do. One of the things he's been working on is re-creating the Dragon Balls."

"_Yoshi_!" Gohan jumped to his feet, eyes lighting. "That's great, Piccolo-san! Can I tell everyone else?"

"Sure. Might be a good idea for you to let Bulma know to drag out her Dragon Radar and be ready to gather them when we're finished. They'll be active when they're first made, and last thing we need is for some tin-plate would-be dictator to get his hands on them. I think Pilaf's still around somewhere, and we all know how bad he wants to rule the world." Piccolo smirked. "Not that he's much of a threat, but he's persistent."

"_Hai_." Gohan lay back again, looking up at the clouds. "It's nice to be under them again," he said softly. "I missed the way the grass smells... Piccolo-san? Do you think I'd make a good teacher?"

"What, a sensei? You thinking about opening a dojo?"

"_Iie_. Just, you know, regular things. Reading and writing, math, science... sort of a part time thing. To help with the children, you know."

Piccolo studied his protÃ©gÃ©. "Is that you talking or your mom?"

"Anou... maybe a little bit of both." Gohan sighed. "It's not that I want to disappoint _tou-san_, but, you know? I'm just not the fighter he is. He keeps telling me I'm so powerful, and somehow I almost never feel it. I can't see it in myself. But at the same time there's something in my heart that believes every word, and when I'm fighting, it burns like a star. Sometimes I feel like I'm being tugged two ways, but that's not how it is! _Tou-san_ would let me be anything I wanted to be, so why am I so confused?"

Sitting up, the Namekseijin looked at Gohan a long while before answering. "Your dad's not a common man, Gohan. Fighting is one of his big loves, it's how he's always seen himself: Son Gokou, the warrior. But tied up tight with that is the idea that fighting's got to mean something. Being a fighter for no other reason than to fight and kill, that's not Gokou's way. It's a gift, his gift, and he wants more than anything else to give. Give a little more of himself to his world, to his family, and to his art, right up to and including his life if that's what it takes.

"You, though... you've been stuck between two worlds right from the start. On one hand, a human life, the human world, like your mom wants; on the other hand, a Saiyajin's life, where sometimes everything hangs on whether or not you can take one more punch, win one more fight. Gokou never had to make the choice of where and how to live. You do. We had to wake you up and shake you out of being a kid way too early, but there wasn't any choice. Chikyu needed your Saiyajin strength. You just want it to need the rest of you too. Because you have a lot more to offer than just your fighting power."

"_Hai_..." The barest whisper. "Piccolo-san... that's the way... I feel inside."

"But it would make it easier if he'd try to pull you, wouldn't it? It's almost as if he doesn't care. But we both know that's a big load of crap." The Namekseijin sighed himself, folding his arms and resting them on his knees while he stared off across the meadow. "You're a mystery to your dad, sometimes, Gohan, but it doesn't matter to him to understand everything you do or say or choose. All that really matters is that you're happy. So, to get back to the _real_ question you were asking, I think Gokou wouldn't have any problems if you decided to step out of the ring once in a while, so to speak, and live a normal life. Because that's what you wanted my opinion on. Not whether you'd be a good teacher, but how much it'd hurt your dad if you told him you hope you never have to fight again. Not like you did versus the Jinzouningen."

"How did you get so wise about me, Piccolo-san?"

"I raised you, Gohan. I'm your _sensei_. And, it could just be that..." Piccolo trailed off, head lowering. In a quiet voice he finished, "It could be you've got two dads, a real one and an adopted one." Then he stood up, deliberately not looking at Gohan. "I've

wasted enough time here. I gotta get going."

"_Hai_, Piccolo-san." The young man's voice was a little huskier than it should be, but it didn't shake, and Piccolo was proud of him for it. "You'll be back soon, ne?"

"Yeah, when I'm finished with what I'm doing. Don't be so eager to get your butt kicked in another training session. And you'd better be able to get closer to me next time, or I'll really make you hurt." Piccolo looked down at Gohan as he rose into the air. "Because don't think I'm gonna let you get soft. You're going to stay in fighting trim, you got it?"

Gohan nodded, a grin spreading on his features.

"_Haiiiii!_"

Piccolo favored him with a spare but definite smile before turning with a flourish of his heavy white cape and speeding up into the high blue sky. Gohan waved, but Piccolo never looked back. Still, Gohan watched until his beloved sensei was gone.

"You've been awfully quiet this morning."

Bulma stretched, leaning back in her chair, and looked over at the slim blonde perching on the edge of the table. "Have I?"

Juuichi-gou cocked her head, her hair spilling to one side. She'd grown her hair out over the past few months; instead of its former razor-straight crop just above her shoulders, it fell in a long silken spill straight down her back almost to her waist. "More so than usual, and I know for a fact it's not because you're engrossed in your work so don't even try to give me that." She pointed at the monitor in front of Bulma. "I don't think even you can find a blinking cursor on a blank screen that fascinating."

Bulma chuckled wearily. "The real secret of invention is to stare at a blank screen until drops of blood begin to stand out on your forehead."

"I thought that was the secret to writing good fiction."

"That too."

"You're avoiding the question. What's got you so pensive? I thought things were going pretty smoothly for a change." Shifting to sit securely on the table, Juuichi-gou picked up an electronic notepad and punched a few of the buttons from long practice. "Not only is Hope City's economy firming up, but the agricultural co-op is predicting a bumper crop this season. Nobody's going to go hungry this winter, which will be a nice change. In other news, the father of your son hasn't threatened to kill me for almost twenty-four hours."

Bulma laughed. "Oh, Juu-chan, you know Vegeta's not going to hurt you."

"Not unless I give him a damned good reason, which I have no

intention of doing." Juuhachi-gou set the notepad aside and pulled her legs up effortlessly, wrapping her arms around them. Bulma watched her with mild envy--it had been years since she'd been that limber. "You know he only tolerates my existence for your sake."

"And Trunks', " Bulma pointed out.

Juuhachi-gou shook her head. "Vegeta could argue him down with no trouble. He might even be able to convince Trunks that killing me was for the best in the long run, if it weren't for you. I'm not saying Trunks is weak-willed; he simply idolizes his father."

"Mmn. He always has."

"You don't sound thrilled."

"Oh, it isn't that, Juu-chan..." Bulma switched off her computer and turned in her chair to face her assistant--her friend. "It's just that before...before everything fell apart, Vegeta didn't want much to do with Trunks. I'm glad he accepts him as his son now, but it wasn't always that way."

"So I gathered. It hasn't been easy for you, has it?"

Bulma's eyes lowered. "No," she agreed softly. "No, it hasn't." She looked up at Juuhachi-gou again and brightened visibly. "But that's not the case anymore. Trunks and Vegeta are getting along as a father and son should--at least they seem to be; I really don't know much about Saiyajin customs or habits. Then again, Vegeta's done quite a bit of acclimating since he, um, came back." She giggled softly.

"It's strange to think of them as father and son." Juuhachi-gou tilted her head and rested it on her folded arms. "Physically, they're almost of an age."

"That's true," Bulma sighed, looking away. "But Saiyajin don't show their age much anyway. Gokou didn't change significantly from the time he reached his full growth at eighteen until he died, and he was almost thirty then."

"Not like humans, ne?"

"Exactly! It--" Bulma stopped and looked at Juuhachi-gou guiltily. "Does it show that much?"

"Only to someone who knows you. You haven't said anything about it for months, but I know it still bothers you."

"That I'm so much older than Vegeta is now? Well, yes it does, but there's nothing to be done about it, is there? I can't turn back the clock. Instead of whining and moping about my age, I should be glad that Vegeta doesn't seem to mind that I'm more than twice as old as he is now."

"Only physically. And if Saiyajin don't age the way humans do, you would have come to this point eventually anyway."

"I know, I know." Bulma waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, don't mind me.

I'm being silly. How are things going with you and Trunks?"

Juuhachi-gou blinked. "Things?"

"Yes, you know..._things_."

" I'm hoping he'll kiss me any day now. We haven't slept together yet, but I'm still holding out hope, if that's what you were asking."

"It wasn't, and that was more information than I really needed, but thank you," Bulma laughed. "I was wondering why you'd grown out your hair."

"For a change, I suppose. It's not like much else about me is going to get different with time. Besides, he's cut his short again." Juuhachi-gou smiled ruefully and tugged on a pale strand of her hair. "I thought if I looked a little different, he might loosen up a bit. I think he still feels...strange...about our relationship. I can't really blame him, either."

"He's very resilient. Give him time."

"I am." Juuhachi-gou slid off the table and stood. "I was going into town with Videl this morning to pick up the latest deliveries. Can I get you anything?"

"I haven't checked the supplies, but I'm almost sure we need some more miso."

"I'll peek into the pantry before I go." Juuhachi-gou patted Bulma's shoulder lightly in passing. "Please don't concern yourself about Vegeta. If he didn't want to be here, I really think he wouldn't."

"Thank you, Juu-chan." Bulma sighed as the Jinzouningen disappeared down the corridor. "Oh, Juu-chan...you completely miss the point." She closed her eyes to hold back a sudden prickling of tears. "How many years do I have left to give him? Ten? Twenty? No more than thirty, surely...it's so unfair. If only I could have the time we lost back..."

A sound from outside made her jump to her feet and run to the window. She got there just in time to see a dark speck rising into the air, disappearing into the wide blueness of the sky almost before she could identify who it was. "Vegeta? Where the hell is he off to now?"

Mr. Popo calmly swept the immaculate marble floor of the Main Hall. It wasn't as if the dwelling of Earth's God needed a great deal of maintenance, but he found the simplest chores oddly satisfying. Popo liked an established routine; it gave order and direction to the day. He had served the old God, the first Kami, for countless ages. The current resident deity was a good deal younger than his predecessor--not only younger, but more innovative and sometimes (it had to be admitted) downright sneaky in his way of getting things to work out to his liking. In the old days, such things would never have

occurred.

Popo paused in his steady sweeping and leaned on his broom, looking out onto the white-tiled courtyard. How many times had Dende stood on the edge of his palace grounds, looking down at his tortured Earth, unheeding of the tears streaming from eyes too weary for his tender years? How many times had Popo reminded him (gently, always gently) that direct interference could well destroy the planet he so desperately wanted to save? "Let things take their natural course," he would repeat over and over. "Everything has its own time."

Even the skill of making the legendary Dragon Balls had been beyond the young God for so long. Piccolo, now once more united with the first Kami, had been the first of Earth's protectors to fall before the Jinzouningen. Able to escape imprisonment in Hell by virtue of the fact that he was half God, Piccolo nevertheless had no material existence, therefore the Dragon Balls made at the beginning of the world had ceased to exist at the moment of his death. Existing, yet not alive, Piccolo had been unable to give Dende the necessary training to make his own Dragon Balls, and the Elders of Namek had flatly refused to offer any assistance. "Why create Dragon Balls for a world that is doomed?" was their reply. Dende, and Popo, knew otherwise, but could not express the basis of their knowledge to the Elders.

Ah, but so much had changed...in all the years without number Popo had been the right hand of God, this past twelvemonth had been the most joyous, the most fulfilling. To see his beloved Kami, young Dende, full of excitement and bursting with the confidence so long denied him in his two decades of godhood--in fact, to see Dende being almost playful in his subtle influencing of events, able to finally lend, however indirectly, aid where it was most needed.... It made Popo's boundless heart fill with joy.

A smile graced Popo's full mouth as he saw Dende and Piccolo--restored to life and existence--hovering in identical lotus postures, each about a meter above the courtyard tiling. Their antennae twitched in silent communication as information and energy was received and transferred from one to the other. Between them, resting on the white tiles below, were seven round, plain stones, grey and featureless.

As Popo watched, the once and future gods bowed their heads, moving as one, their hands extending out to each other, fingers not quite touching. Energy visible only to the trained eye flowed from Piccolo to Dende, then from Dende to the stones, which began to feebly glow.

A new presence tickled at the edge of Popo's perceptions; he looked to the west and saw a black-clad shape hovering just beyond the edge of the courtyard, over open air, watching. Popo knew him at once, of course: Vegeta. What could he possibly want? He'd never been a frequent visitor in his years as a Celestial; he didn't seem to care much for the quiet and peace of Dende's palace. Whatever business he had with Dende, Popo thought it an odd show of consideration and manners for the former Prince of the Saiyajin to wait there, unannounced, to be noticed. Perhaps Vegeta was finally learning proper decorum. That would be a welcome change.

If Popo could have read Vegeta's mind, however, he would have known

differently. The Saiyajin wasn't the least bit concerned with manners or propriety; the only thing that had stopped him simply barging in, catching up Dende, and demanding he do something to set Bulma's mind at ease was sensing the power rising between them. And, if truth be told, curiosity was playing its part; what in the universe's reaches were they doing, Piccolo and Dende, with those stones? What game were they at? With a scowl, he folded his arms and stood quiet in mid-air, waiting to see exactly what the pair was up to before he persuaded Kami--one way or another--to do as he asked.

A flare of power brought everyone's attention to the Namekseijin and their work. A small smile graced Dende's face--mirrored strangely on Piccolo's, making him look heartachingly like the first Kami. The cold stones rose up into the air, and one by one they turned from dull gray rocks to shining, clear golden spheres. Stars--white, glowing and shimmering as though plucked from a night sky--glimmered to life inside each sphere, each holding a different number, from one to seven.

Dende and Piccolo opened their eyes. "Doumo arigatou gozaimasu, Piccolo-san," Dende said in his soft musical tenor.

Piccolo smirked, but it was almost a real smile. "Don't mention it, kid."

Dende set his feet on the ground and turned. "Mr. Popo," he said, and although he didn't raise his voice it sounded clearly in the Main Hall, "would you please...?"

He didn't have to finish. Popo set the broom in its place near the hearth and picked up a beautifully carved ebony box from the mantle. He walked outside, his gait deceptively clumsy-looking, carrying the box in front of him, already open.

Dende waved his hand and the Dragon Balls floated neatly into the red-velvet interior of the box. "They're beautiful, Piccolo-san."

"Hey, you're the one who made 'em, Dende. I just showed you the ropes."

"Mr. Popo, until it's time to distribute them, would you place the box in--"

FWOOSH

Suddenly Popo's hands were empty. He blinked, not quite sure what had happened at first. He'd forgotten how fast Saiyajin could actually move.

"Oh." Dende looked off to the black speck shrinking rapidly from view into the distance. "Never mind, Mr. Popo."

"WHAT THE HELL--?!" bellowed Piccolo. "Vegeta, you son of a bitch, come back here with those!!" He jumped into the air and flew off after Vegeta at top speed.

Dende trotted to the edge of the courtyard. "Vegeta-san," he said, very very softly. "Come back. Vegeta-san..." He turned his wide eyes to Mr. Popo, a sparkle of mischief hidden in their soulful depths.

"Oh, dear. I don't think Vegeta-san can hear me."

One corner of Popo's wide mouth twitched. He huffed a sigh. "Some people never learn."

"Ahhhhh..." Son Gokou looked up at the dazzling sky and drank in the fresh air and sunshine. "I think I go fishing today! I still need to get back into practice catching fish with my tail!"

"That sounds like a wonderful idea, Gokou-san." ChiChi set down her empty washing basket and stretched a kink out of her back. "It's been too long since we've had fresh fish for dinner...what's that?"

Gokou watched, wide-eyed, as a small black shape shot over the house. "Oi! Vegeta! Why didn't you show up to spar this morning?!" Moments later, a second form, this one much larger with a billowing white cape, nearly broke the sound barrier in passing overhead, hotly pursuing the first. "That's a good reason," Gokou said. "Oi, Piccolo!"

"What in the world?!" ChiChi wondered. "Gokou! Where do you think you're going?" she continued as her husband rose a few feet into the air.

Gokou paused. "I'm going to see what's happening! It looks exciting!"

"Not without me you're not!"

"But ChiChi--!"

"The last time I let you chase after those two you nearly got killed by our son!" ChiChi stripped off her apron and folded her arms. "I'm not letting you out of my sight until we know exactly what's going on."

"Oh, okay--wait! I got an idea!" Gokou put two fingers in his mouth and blew a piercing whistle. Moments later, a cloud of shimmering gold rose above the treetops and swooped down beside Gokou. "Ah, Kintoen! I knew you'd still be around somewhere!" Gokou scooped ChiChi up and set her on the flying cloud, then settled behind her himself. "Kintoen--follow that Namekseijin!" he ordered.

ChiChi squealed and clung to Gokou as the Kintoen sped off at a heartstopping pace after Piccolo.

"BULMA!"

She squealed, dropping the beaker she held. By the time it hit the floor and shattered, she was at the window. She had never heard such urgency in Vegeta's voice. "What is it?"

Without a word, Vegeta reached through the open window and grabbed Bulma around the waist, yanking her out of her lab. She shrieked as they dropped to the ground, the landing jarring her to the teeth. "Dammit, Vegeta--!"

"Shut up." He let her go, took a box out from under his arm, and opened it, smirking as he did so. What perfect timing you have, Kami, to recreate these just in time for me to put them to good use, he thought. Bulma had enough time to wonder what was casting the golden radiance on his face and just managed to come up with the answer when he shouted, at the top of his lungs, "Appear, SHENLON!"

"DAMMIT NO!" Piccolo was within arm's reach of the box when a beam of intense white light shot up from the cluster of balls within. A string of alien language that could only be Namek profanity erupted from Piccolo's lips, drowned out by the sudden crash of thunder above.

The sky turned black as thick clouds roiled into existence, lightning searing across the roiling depths. Bulma gasped, her heart racing as a familiar shape began to form--well, almost familiar...if Shenlon had been huge before, this time he was massive.

The Legendary Dragon's body seemed to fill the sky from horizon to horizon, coils twisting lazily upon each other. A massive head lowered itself; the mouth opened to show wickedly curved teeth, each one the size of a redwood. The clear golden eyes were the size of moons, gazing down on them dispassionately, as old as the stars and as young as the next moment.

A deep voice rose above the constant roll of thunder, making the windows of Capsule Corporation shiver in their frames. **"Who summons Shenlon?"**

*** "Sugee!" Gokou leapt off the Kintoen as it descended. "Hi, Shenlon! Long time no see!" He waved as the immense head tipped ever so slightly in his direction, acknowledging his presence.

ChiChi just stared upwards, mouth open. "Oh....my...."

"What the hell is going on?" Juuhachi-gou jumped out of the skycar; Videl followed her, looking up, scarcely noticing where she was going.

"Who summons Shenlon?" the dragon boomed again, so loud this time Bulma winced.

"I do, you overgrown earthworm!" Vegeta shouted over the thunder.

"Ve_ge_ta!" Bulma hissed warningly. He ignored her.

The ponderous gaze shifted marginally to focus on the Saiyajin Prince. **"What is your wish?"**

*** Vegeta smirked self-importantly. "I want you," he said, "to make this woman," pointing at Bulma, "the age..." He considered for a moment. "Make this woman the age she was when she first met Kakarott." His eyes cut to Gokou and ChiChi, who still sat on the cloud staring upwards, then he looked back at the dragon and added, "And the same for Kakarott's female as well. And hurry up about it!"

"_NANI?!_" Gokou shouted. "Vegeta, _don't--_"

He was cut off by a sound that made everyone present stare upwards, a sound that precluded any attempt at debate or discussion.

Shenlon, the Legendary Dragon, was laughing.

Bulma swallowed hard. She had seen Shenlon appear more times than anyone living, perhaps, and she'd seen definite signs of emotion in the usually remote being before, but she had never heard him laugh before. While she was still marveling over the occurrence, she felt her skin begin to tingle, and the world around her disappeared in a shimmering nimbus of golden-white light.

**"Your wish," **Shenlon said, still chuckling, **"is
granted_!!"**

*** With a burst of radiance as bright as the midday sun, Shenlon vanished. The box shattered to splinters in Vegeta's hands, and the Dragon Balls rose up into the clearing sky, shot off in seven separate directions, and vanished over the wide horizon. The clouds evaporated as the last clap of thunder faded on the air, leaving only peaceful midday calm behind.

"Bulma..." Videl's whisper broke the silence.

"Aa-aaa...?" Bulma looked down at herself. Her clothes hung on her oddly, several sizes too large for her now--except across the upper chest, where her shirt almost fit too tightly. She reached up and felt at her hair--it was long again, long as it had been when she was sixteen and kept it bundled up in a topknot. She touched her face--it was smooth, unlined, the skin soft and dewy-fresh.

Wide-eyed, she looked at Vegeta. "I'm...I...Vegeta...?" she murmured, lost, then fell silent at the look in his eyes. For just that moment there was something almost wondering and worshipful in his gaze, as if he'd never seen anything or anyone that could match her, and never dreamt anyone could suit him so perfectly. Then his usual half amused, half disdainful expression slid into place like a shield.

"That was Shenlon!" Gohan said excitedly as he and Trunks dropped to the ground. "We were off sparring and saw the Dragon appear!"

"It was incredible! He was bigger than the other world's Dragon--guh--geh--keh--_Kaa-san?!!?!" Trunks gaped at his mother, who was now four years younger, physically, than he was himself.

"None other." Vegeta took a step towards Bulma, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him. He turned, annoyed. "What--"

WHAM!!

*** Vegeta dug a trench in the lawn with his back. Bulma shrieked, Trunks started forward, and Gohan gasped, "To-Tou-san? Nani--?!"

"_VEGETA!!! KONO BAAAAAKA!"_ Gokou was angry. He was angrier than Bulma ever remembered having seen him. "You have the nerve to call

me idiot?! What the _hell_ you do that for?! Why don't you _think_ before you wish for something?!!!"

"Son-kun!" Bulma stepped in front of Gokou, who was about to go after Vegeta again. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"_Tou-san_?" Gohan paused and looked around. Something wasn't right, but he wasn't quite able to place it. Suddenly everyone around him seemed upset. Piccolo was angry, but that wasn't anything particularly new and he was sure his _sensei_ would tell him what was wrong eventually. His father was _furious_, which _was_ something new and different. Vegeta, climbing back to his feet out of the trench Gokou had knocked him into, looked angry--again, nothing new--but also vaguely puzzled. Trunks was trying to decide how best to protect his father, or perhaps wondering if he should interfere at all. Juuhachi-gou and Videl were watching from the sidelines, trying to stay clear of any potential battle area. And sitting on the golden cloud, the Kintoen--

He should know that girl...the one sitting there, wide-eyed, her clothes hanging off her small slim body, much too big for her. He _should know_ her. He knew he should, but he didn't know _why_ until she looked at him with her wide brown eyes and wavered uncertainly, "Go...Gohan-chan...?"

Her voice was unmistakable. Gohan's jaw dropped.
"Ka..._Kaa-san?!!?!"

"_Bakayarou!!_" Gokou fairly screamed at Vegeta over Bulma's shoulder. "When I met ChiChi she was _twelve years old!!!"

"Gokou..._Gokou-saaaaan!_" ChiChi wailed, understanding finally settling in.

With a final savage glare at Vegeta, Gokou spun on his heel. His expression softened and he went to the girl sitting on the hovering cloud. "It's all right, ChiChi," he said. "We'll fix it. I promise you, somehow we'll get it fixed."

ChiChi collapsed against Gokou's broad chest and dissolved into tears. He gathered her up and jumped on the cloud. "Gohan," he said, the undercurrent of rage still in his voice. "Let's go home. Your mother, she needs us right now."

"Ha-_Hai,_ _Tou-san._" Gohan glanced at Videl, who nodded in understanding. _Go_, she mouthed to him. He flashed her a grateful, loving smile and took off after his parents.

"I knew nothing good would come of this," Piccolo grumbled, and took off in the opposite direction.

"Speak for yourself," Bulma said, tugging experimentally at her clothes. "I mean...poor ChiChi, but..._wow_...!"

"If you need the car to get back to town, Videl, feel free. I can pick it up later." Juuhachi-gou looked around as Trunks appeared at her side.

"What...what...?" he asked her.

"Don't ask me, I just got here myself." Juuhachi-gou leaned back against Trunks and smiled as he obligingly put one arm around her. "One thing's for sure, things are going to get a lot more interesting around here from now on."

Trunks groaned.

Part Two

> "The World Was Set On Fire" <p>

_ I had a dream last night the world was set on fire
> And everywhere I ran there wasn't any water
 The temperature increased, the sky was crimson red
> The clouds turned into smoke and everyone was dead_

_ _Tilla took a deep breath and straightened up, surveying the neat string-measured rows of the field behind her. The weeding was almost done, and the soybeans were growing well in the fertile ground. It was good to see that no one would go hungry this winter. She wondered idly if the southern rice farmers were enjoying as good a season as the soy and maize growers were.

At least there was no longer any danger of the Jinzouningen swooping out of the sky and destroying everything in sight. She'd heard rumors that one of the cyborgs had survived, but she wasn't going to believe it until she saw it for herself. Tilla was, if nothing else, a sensible sort.

A sound from the sky made one of her pointed ears twitch, and she shaded her slitted eyes, looking up. First the freak storm that blew up out of nowhere and vanished within minutes in the direction of Capsule Corporation--a storm that blackened the sky and crackled with lightning but produced no wind, no rain--now...now something was falling out of the sky.

A huge projectile screamed down out of the sky and slammed into the ground on the far side of the field, narrowly missing the rows. Tilla threw her hoe to one side and took off at a run towards the landing site. Halfway there she dropped to all fours to increase speed and raced between the rows to her goal.

At first she thought it was a meteor, but when she drew close she realized that it was some kind of...of machine. The surface glowed red and hissed with heat, tendrils of steam rising from the place it came to rest. A scent of ozone tickled her nose, making her whiskers twitch.

A loud **pop** made her yowl in alarm and jump back, back arching, tail bottle-brushing. Part of the machine--some kind of craft, obviously--flew upwards, and a black shape emerged. Humanoid, yes, but obviously not of this world. It was all flat black metal, featureless and cold; where the face should have been was a blank mask of black glassy material.

Tilla grabbed for the gun her father had left to her and held it out in front of her, trying to keep her paw from shaking. "Don't come any closer!" she wavered, baring her feline fangs. "What the hell are

you? Stay away!!"

The blank faceless head swiveled, and Tilla sensed it was looking at her. Studying her. Then it took a step towards her.

"Stay back, I said!" she howled, holding the gun in front of her.
"I'll shoot, I swear to Kami I'll shoot!"

The shape continued to advance. With a yowl born of equal parts of fear and rage, Tilla pulled the trigger.

Six shots ping_ed off the breastplate of the black shape before it reached her and twisted the gun from her. It crushed the weapon in its massive black hand and cast it aside.

Memories of the Jinzouningen flashed through Tilla's mind--how her father had tried to stand up to the dark-haired one, firing his gun again and again, and how he had died telling her to run. And now it was happening again...to her...

Confronted with a creature that could have stepped from her nightmares, Tilla did the only sensible thing. She fainted.

The black shape stood over Tilla's motionless form for a moment. Then it shook its faceless head, turned, and took off into the air to begin the search for the one called Vegeta.

"...but how could you just let him fly off with the damn things, Dende? Vegeta's the breathing definition of 'loose cannon'. How could you trust him with the Dragon Balls?!"

In contrast to Piccolo's hot-tempered ire, Dende stood cool and quite unruffled before his mentor. "Piccolo-san, you should know well the rules governing such things. Are the Dragon Balls not created to serve whosoever might trouble themselves to find them?"

Piccolo bared his wickedly curved teeth. "Vegeta did not 'find them', " he snarled. "He snatched them right out from under your nose!"

"I don't see that as a violation of the terms, Piccolo-san."

Piccolo snorted in disgust and threw up his taloned hands. "You're impossible. Popo, dammit, can't you talk some sense into him?!"

"What's done is done, Piccolo-san," Popo pointed out. "Anyway, nothing bad came of it. Quite the contrary, so I understand."

"Well, I think Gokou might argue that point with you. Damn, I've never seen him so mad, except maybe when I offed his buddy Kuririn." In spite of himself, Piccolo smirked a bit and shook his head. "I think maybe getting his tail back gave Gokou more backbone than he had to begin with. He really read Asparagus-Head the riot act, chapter and verse."

"If Gokou-san is truly that upset, why doesn't he simply recollect the Dragon Balls and wish his wife older?" Dende wondered

aloud.

"Yeah, well, how long will that be? A year? Six months at the inside? Till then he's stuck with a first-year junior high schooler as a wife. I don't know what Gokou's moral standards are, but I think puberty's probably a prerequisite to intimacy. There's gonna be a lot of cold showers taken in the Son household till the Balls recover."

"The Dragon Balls are still active, Piccolo-san."

Piccolo blinked. "Huhn?"

Dende smiled at him placidly. "Vegeta-san only used two wishes--to make Bulma-san young, and to make ChiChi-san young. There's one wish left before the Dragon Balls become inactive for half a year's time."

"Damn." Piccolo's voice was not without admiration. "Three wishes? That's some kind of high-octane Dragon Balls you made, Dende."

"I had a good teacher, Piccolo-san."

"So will you tell Gokou the good news?" Popo asked.

Piccolo thought about it, and grinned wickedly. "Maybe eventually...but not right now. Let 'im take it out of Vegeta's hide for a while yet."

Dende smiled indulgently--then stiffened, eyes widening, antennae twitching just perceptibly.

Piccolo noticed the change at once. "What's up?"

Dende held up a hand and walked to the edge of his courtyard. He looked down, and his eyes went wide. "It's begun," he whispered.

"What?" Piccolo was at Dende's side in a moment. Following the younger Namekseijin's gaze, he saw a large, bulky armored form gliding across the horizon near the surface. "What the hell is that?!"

"A visitor." Dende's voice was so soft even Piccolo could barely hear the words. "Trouble for Vegeta-san, and for the rest of you as well."

"Well, as much as the little jerk deserves all the trouble he gets, I guess I better go run interference and at least see what's up." Piccolo could not have failed to miss the concern furrowing Dende's features. There was a threat going on here to a lot more than one troublesome Saiyajin. He knew better than to ask stupid questions. Dende had already revealed all he could...perhaps all he knew himself.

Piccolo jumped off the edge, righted himself in the air, and flew off to catch up with the armored stranger, his cape dazzling white against the blue of the sky.

Dende sighed softly as Popo came to his side. "So it begins..." he

whispered.

Solemnly, Popo nodded.

The armored stranger pulled up short at the sudden appearance of a white-robed green figure. Piccolo stood in midair, his arms folded, his turbaned head bowed, a sardonic half-smile on his face.

The stranger paused, the noonday sun reflecting off the featureless visor. "A Namekseijin." The voice was electronically enhanced--hollow, sexless. "On Earth?"

"We get around." Piccolo drifted closer. "Just call me the Welcome Wagon."

"You might be able to assist me, actually." The stranger extended a hand, and a holographic image flickered to life in the gloved palm--a very familiar figure, ten centimeters high and in perfect detail. Vegeta, as he'd appeared when he first arrived on Earth, in full Saiyajin armor, smirking and defiantly self-confident. "Have you seen this man?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I do."

"Do tell. Mind explaining why?"

"Look, I don't want trouble." The stranger snapped the gloved hand closed and the hologram of Vegeta vanished. "I'm just here to do the job I've been paid for, and if you know where Prince Vegeta of the Saiyajin happens to be hiding, I'd appreciate you giving me that information before I have to beat it out of your sorry green hide."

The smile on Piccolo's face grew dangerously wide. "I'd like to see you try," he said, bringing two fingers to his brow.

ChiChi lay in the bed she shared with her husband, finally asleep. Long black lashes lay on her cheeks, and she breathed deeply as Gokou continued to gently stroke her soft black hair. She now wore a deep blue dogi that had belonged to Gohan as a child--sentimental to a fault, ChiChi had never discarded any of her only child's belongings, not even his outgrown clothes.

Gokou sensed someone behind him and turned his head. He managed a smile for his son. "_Ossu_," he said quietly.

"How is she, _Tou-san_?" Gohan whispered from the bedroom doorway.

"Resting now, I think. She wore herself out crying."

"Poor _Kaa-san_." Moving as silently as possible, Gohan drew near the bed. "You know, she really was--_is--a cute little girl..."

"_Sou_." Gokou nodded. "She was pretty good fighter, too, till she gave it up to marry me."

"How about you, _Tou-san_?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you okay now?" Gohan shifted from one foot to the other and ran a hand through his black crop of hair. "I've never seen you so mad before. Not even when you fought Vegeta when he was trying to destroy the Earth."

"_Saaaaaaa...._" Gokou looked down at the form of his sleeping child-wife and sighed. "I wouldn't've been so mad if I didn't know how upset ChiChi was gonna be. Me, I don't care what age she is, I still love her. But see it from her side--how she's gonna be a good wife and everything as a little girl? 'Specially since she's still a grown-up woman up here?" He tapped his forehead with a finger.

Gohan nodded. "I understand, Tou-san. Maybe we can look for the Dragon Balls and wish her back--" His eyes snapped wide and he straightened, a look of alarm on his face.

"Gohan?" Gokou rose to his feet; ChiChi murmured in her sleep, but didn't stir.

"Piccolo-san," Gohan whispered. "Something's happened to him."

Gokou nodded once. He felt something, too--a strange disturbance that had big and green and Namekseijin stamped all over it. "You go see what's going on. I want to stay with ChiChi to make sure she's okay."

"_Hai, Tou-san._" Gohan turned and ran out of the room, launched himself through the door and was airborne before his foot hit the doorstep.

Vegeta stood brooding against the far wall, glaring at the bedroom closet. Soft little murmurs and giggles sounded from within as the occasional bit of clothing came sailing out to join the haphazard pile on the bed. "No, can't wear that, it's miles too big...oh, this is still good..._ha!_ I didn't know I still had these!! Goody!...Eww! When did I ever wear this thing? Toss!--"

"_Bakana_," Vegeta snarled. "Aren't you done yet?"

"Yes, I think that's everything I can salvage." Bulma bounced out wearing a Capsule Corporation T-shirt, cutoff jeans, and ankle boots. Her hair was gathered up into the topknot ponytail she'd worn the first time she'd been sixteen. "How do I look?" she asked, posing.

Vegeta sneered. "Uglier than I expected."

Bulma put her hands on her hips, leaned forward and stuck out her tongue at him. "Rude!!!"

"I'll show you rude." Vegeta covered the distance between them in three strides and reached out for her. Showing a nimbleness she'd never displayed before, she evaded his grasp. "Not so fast," she admonished. "I'm going into town with Juu this afternoon to get some new clothes. I have almost nothing to wear anymore."

"You'd rather spend the afternoon with that wind-up doll than with me?!" he asked incredulously.

She turned and slapped him on the shoulder as hard as she dared. It didn't even sting, but it did make him blink. "You are such a b_rute! I don't know why I even bother with you." She spun on her heel and stomped out of the bedroom without so much as a glance back.

Vegeta stood there for a moment, trying to comprehend what had just happened. "I've created a monster," he muttered, then turned and leapt from the window and was gone.

Gohan picked up speed, struggling to get a fix on Piccolo's fading ki signature. "Hold on, Piccolo-san," he murmured, his hands clenching into fists. "I'm coming."

As much as he deplored conflict, he could feel his blood starting to sing in anticipation of the battle to come. It was part of him, the Saiyajin love of warfare, and he could no more deny that than he could deny his other, human nature--the part of him that wanted nothing more than to find a nice girl, settle down and raise a house full of beautiful children.

One down, two to go, he thought, then carefully sealed those dreams away so he could have a clear head for whatever needed to be done.

He was over the wilderness now, the long stretch of monster-roamed wildlands he'd spent the sixth year of his life in while training for the coming of the Saiyajin. He could feel Piccolo more clearly now, very close, very weak--

There! He saw a crumpled field of white and crimson and dropped from the sky to the top of a barren mesa. His sensei lay sprawled there, motionless, arms outflung. If he hadn't been able to sense the faintest of ki from the Namekseijin, he would have thought Piccolo dead.

"Piccolo-san..." Gohan searched the skies, but saw nothing. Nor did his senses reveal any enemy nearby, but he was still on his guard--he'd spent most of his life fighting the Jinzouningen, who had no ki signatures to speak of. He knelt down. "Piccolo-san, I'm here. I'm going to get you out of here--"

A green hand closed around his wrist, the grip tight enough to hurt. Gohan gasped, and Piccolo's eyes slit open. "Go...Gohan..." Blood, or something like it, seeped from one corner of the Namekseijin's mouth.

"Don't speak, Piccolo-_san_."

"...behind you...!"

Piccolo released him, and Gohan shot up into the air as a beam of blue-white energy seared through the space he'd occupied moments ago. The Namekseijin coughed twice and lay still.

Gohan spun in midair. For a moment, there was nothing there; then, as he watched, a form shimmered into existence--easily as large as Piccolo, the figure was black-armored with a blank visor over its face.

"_Ittai dare ka?_" Gohan snapped, feeling rage build up inside him--and welcoming it as necessary for what he would have to do. "Who the hell are you?"

"A Saiyajin. How interesting, I didn't think there were that many left." The hollow, inhuman voice held a touch of sarcasm. "Your green friend wouldn't tell me where to find Vegeta. Maybe you'll cooperate, seeing what happened to him."

"I asked you a question." Gohan lowered his head, eyes narrowing. "I expect an answer."

"The Namekseijin was defiant too. You can see where it got him."

"If you're trying to scare me, it won't work."

"I know better than that. Saiyajin are too stupid to be scared of anything." The black stranger raised a hand, the hologram flickering to life again. "Let's keep it simple. I'm looking for this one. Prince Vegeta. Tell me where to find him and I'll let you and your buddy off easy."

Gohan was about to answer when movement caught his eye, far behind the stranger. Even from such a great distance, he recognized Vegeta, who evidently had taken no notice of them at all, and was on his way to Kami knew where.

Stall, Gohan, he told himself sternly. He had to keep the stranger talking so Vegeta could remain unnoticed. "If I knew where this 'Vegeta' was," he said, folding his arms and cocking his head, "why would I tell you?"

"Because you won't like what happens to you if you don't."

"Brave words. Words never won a fight, though."

"Agreed." The stranger extended an arm, but Gohan was gone before the bolt could hit him. He reappeared behind his attacker, hands cupping at his side. "_Kaaaaa-meeee-haaaaa-meeee-HAAAAAA!!!_"

The stranger took off upwards to escape the blast; Gohan arced it to follow and it seized hold of the black-armored figure, driving it into a wide arc before finally slamming it into the ground below the mesa.

Gohan let the blast fade, dusting his hands off, and drifted down

towards the impact crater. "As I said," he intoned, "words never won a fight."

The debris at the center of the crater stirred, and the stranger stood up. The armor was a bit dusty, but unscathed. "I've got a lot more than words, little man. As I'll be happy to show you."

Trunks' high brow creased slightly, and he cocked his head to one side. "Did you hear something?"

"No." Sitting on the high tree-branch beside him, Juuhachi-gou leaned her head on his shoulder. "And don't change the subject."

"_Gomen._" Trunks gave the top of her head a small smile.
"_Ano..._what was the subject?"

"I asked you why you cut your hair short again."

"Oh." He chuckled and ran a hand through his fresh-cropped bangs.
"Papa said it made me look like a woman."

Juuhachi-gou gave a very unladylike snort. "I might have known your father would have something to do with it."

Trunks sighed. "You don't like him much, do you?"

"Oh, I don't have a problem with Vegeta. He's the one who has a problem with me. And no, I don't blame him for it. Mostly, I just try to keep out of his way."

"Papa's not very forgiving." Trunks slipped an arm around Juuhachi-gou's narrow shoulders.

"Well, I'm glad you take after your mother as much as you do."

Trunks blushed lightly. "Ah..._arigatou_."

She raised her head to look at him, studied his face for a moment. Then she tilted her face up to him and closed her eyes. Tiny patches of sunlight picked little white-gold glints out of her hair. Her lashes, light-colored but long and lush, lay against her smooth creamy cheeks. Her small pink mouth was as perfect as a rosebud. She held still, waiting for...what?

It took Trunks a moment to grasp the significance of her action. Then his blush deepened and he swallowed hard. He took a slow, steady breath and leaned closer. He could feel his natural grace deserting him; the first kiss he gave her would be as awkward as a schoolboy's--

With his mouth nearly touching hers, he sensed it again. Not a sound this time, not even mistakable for one; a tugging deep inside him, an echo in response to another far distant. And it had a name.

"Gohan-_san!_" he shouted, tearing himself away from Juuhachi-gou and

launching himself out of the tree into the air.

Juuhachi-gou blinked, startled, then recovered herself and took off after him. "Trunks! _Baka_! _Nanda yo?!"

"It's Gohan," he gasped over his shoulder to her, gaining speed. "Someone's attacking him--and I think he's _losing_...!"

There was fear in Trunks' voice, an old fear. Juuhachi-gou didn't have to read his thoughts to know what he was remembering. She nodded grimly and kept pace with him as they flew towards whatever threat awaited.

Trunks rocketed through the air, feeling the surge and pull of energy ahead of him. Gohan's he knew; the other he didn't. It didn't matter. There was a fight, and he was needed, as he'd been so many times before. He glanced to one side, saw Juu with him, and felt a little better. Between the two of them, they should be enough to give Gohan-san the backup he needed.

And Trunks was willing to bet Gohan would welcome the help.

There! Two figures, circling in the air, brightening the sky with spirit's fire. Drawing his sword, he arced up, then flew into a power-dive out of the sun, using it as cover for a first strike.

As he swooped in, the dark figure's head snapped up, and Trunks gasped as he saw no features. Then he shook his head--a helmet of some kind-- and continued in.

"Trunks! Trunks, _iie!_ _Yamero!!_" Gohan's voice called after him, but he was already up on the figure, sword swinging in a cut that should lay open his target's side--

Should.

Instead, as the blade swung in, the figure's side seemed to ripple and hump up, catching the tip of his sword and holding it and at the same time an arc of power leapt up the metal blade. Trunks screamed as it hit him, burning into his nerves. He tried to let go of the swordhilt, but his fingers, his muscles, refused to obey him, only juddered and spasmed on the grip.

"TRUNKS!" Juuhachi-gou flew forward, slamming a shoulder into him. The energy surging from the armored figure caught her too, but her momentum carried the pair of them, her and Trunks, free of the field. Behind them, the sword fell free as their attacker turned. "More Saiyajin?" a voice echoed. "Damn, they breed like ryohkis..."

Shaking off the paralysis, Trunks steadied Juuhachi-gou. "Are you all right?" he said in a low voice, never taking his eyes off the stranger.

"I've felt better." A shaky laugh.

"What was that?"

"An electrical charge. A powerful one. A few seconds more and my internals would've shut down to avoid burnout." Juu swept her hair

back from her face. "Be careful. There's enough voltage there to kill even a Saiyajin."

Gohan flew up to join them. "I was trying to warn you," he said softly. "You can't touch it... him. And ki blasts don't have any effect either. The armor has some kind of deflection or absorption ability. I threw a kamehameha at him and he shrugged it off like nothing..." the young man threw a worried glance downwards. "Piccolo-san didn't have any better luck."

"_Kuso_," Trunks snarled. "What does he want?"

Gohan drew closer still. "Vegeta," he whispered.

"Papa?!"

"Sh! Trunks-kun, keep your voice down!" Gohan put a hand to Trunks' shoulder. "We can't let him know we know anything about--."

"Enough stalling." The armored head cocked upwards and one hand swung up. The trio tensed, then relaxed slightly as once more the hologram materialized in one metal-sheathed palm. "I'll ask you one more time. Have you seen this man? I'm warning you, refusing to divulge any information you have could have serious legal ramifications."

"Legal...?" Juu murmured. Raising her voice, she asked, "What do you mean, 'legal'? Just who are you anyway--and why are you hunting that man?"

"Simple enough." The figure folded arms heavy with armor plating. "Prince Vegeta is a wanted man. The Saiyajin race is responsible for the extermination of countless intelligent lifeforms all across the universe. As the leader of that race, Prince Vegeta is liable for their actions. Plus, I'm given to understand he himself was personally responsible for the destruction of several worlds and the population thereof. I've been hired to bring him in... dead or alive." Somehow a current of amusement crept into the amplified tones. "Can't say I'm fussy right now about his condition when I do bring him in... the pay is the same whether he's breathing or not."

"Bounty hunter," Trunks gasped.

"That's about it. Matter of fact, you might as well call me 'Hunter'... it's pretty close to what my name would mean in your language anyway." Hunter raised a hand. "Don't get me wrong. I'm not here to run wild on the planet. But I'm also not going to brook any opposition. Anyone who helps Prince Vegeta is aiding a known criminal. A murderer on a celestial scale."

"And you're any better?" Gohan clenched his fists. "You attacked Piccolo-san!"

"Look, I'm sorry about your friend, the Namekseijin? But he'll regenerate. Should be healing up right now, as a matter of fact, and he DID fire on me first. I was a little jumpy, I could've been a little more diplomatic. I'll apologize to him later. I'm not here to make friends. I've got a job to do."

"But the Saiyajin race is gone," Trunks said. "The planet, Vegetasei, blew up, along with most of the Saiyajin. Isn't that enough? They met the same fate you're saying they dealt to other people. Why can't you let the killing end with that?"

"I'm aware of that. Obviously SOME survived..." a slight chuckle.
"You're proof of that. But there haven't been any documented incidents of Saiyajin invasion for over 20 years, and if a few of you decided to settle down and mind your own business, I'm going to be the last one who'll stop you from living a peaceful life. Doesn't excuse the fact that Vegeta is legally and morally responsible for the previous actions of his people as well as his own. He's been found guilty; I'm only carrying out the sentence. Now... DO you know Prince Vegeta? Did he make it here? You can save a lot of trouble if you'll just tell me the truth."

_*What do we do, Gohan-san?* Trunks asked silently. _*We can't-!*

__*Na, Trunks-kun, don't worry. I don't have any intention of leading this 'Hunter' to Vegeta-san*, Gohan answered the same way.
_*I... it's true, what he says about your tousan... I'm sorry... but Vegeta died trying to protect Chikyu. In his own way he's making atonement for the man he was. I believe that. More than that, I don't think MY Tou-san would put his faith in Vegeta-san unless there was some good in him, some worth, that outweighs his past and makes him worth honoring with a second chance.*

__*You've sold me... even if he wasn't my father. But how do we convince Hunter??*

__*I don't know, Trunks-kun...* Aloud Gohan said, "It's true, we're part Saiyajin. My tousan came here as a baby, but he was raised as a human--um, one of this world's people. He only learned we were any different long after he'd grown up. We don't want any trouble."

"We've already had plenty." Juu gestured around. "As you can see, the planet's in a period of reconstruction."

"Quite the little local disaster, I take it."

"Oh, it was. Trust me. I was there." Juu's voice was perfectly calm, but Trunks caught the flash of pain the words cost her in her eyes.
"In any event, this Vegeta person you want isn't here."

"Have you heard of him?"

"I think he dropped by a few years ago. Some band of warriors drove him off."

Hunter paused. When the modulated voice sounded again, it was full of surprise. "That's... interesting. You mean to tell me there are people here who can actually match a Saiyajin warrior? That must have been a hell of a battle. --Wait... you--" the gloved hand pointed at Gohan. "What's your name?"

"Gohan. Son Gohan."

"Gohan. You said your father is a Saiyajin. Did he help drive Vegeta

off?"

"Ummm... anou...." Gohan swallowed. "Hai. He did."

"I want to talk to him, then. He might be able to tell me which way Vegeta headed."

"Aa--" Gohan broke out in a sweat. Beside him, Trunks groaned almost inaudibly.

"Um, that's not such a good idea," Juu broke in as the two young men tried to come up with some way of politely refusing Hunter.

"Gokou--that's Gohan's father--was dropped on his head when he was a baby. He's, you know..." one finger drew circles in the air beside her temple. "He's a great fighter, all you really have to do is give him a firm push in the right direction, but he's been known to talk to people who aren't there. Just ask him some time about his little chats with God."

"Really?" Hunter's head cocked to one side.

"Oh definitely. He's a numbskull. A nitwit. An absolute space case. An addle-pated lout. Completely and blissfully free of the ravages of intelli--"

"JUUHACHI-GOU-SAN!" Gohan whirled. "That's my TOU-SAN you're talking about! He's not THAT stupid!"

Softly, through gritted teeth, Juu answered, "Yes he IS, Gohan. ISN'T he, Trunks?"

"Ha-hai!" Trunks nodded frantically. "Just ask MY father! Papa's always saying how much of an idiot Kakarott is!"

"Ah, so your father is also a Saiyajin." Hunter nodded. "I thought you two, Gohan and you, might be brothers at first. Well, maybe your father can help me--Trunks, is it? Hm, odd name, but I can hardly make remarks..." a chuckle.

Juu's face fell with an almost audible psychic thud. "Way to go, murasakige," she muttered.

Trunks just covered his face, wondering when the intelligence his mother'd bequeathed him had decided to take a vacation without prior notification. "My father is on an extended trip," he said, hoping the same was true. "He often disappears for days at a time."

The Hunter's helmet shook slowly from side to side. "Why do I get the idea you people don't want me talking to anyone around these parts?" he said, more than a hint of accusation in his tones. "All right, fine. I'll just have to make my search a little more extensive."

"There won't be any need for that." A figure dropped down between the young Saiyajin and Hunter, arms crossed, a familiar smirk on his features.

"Papa," Trunks gasped, eyes widening. "Shimasen--"

"You wanted me?" Vegeta continued, as if he hadn't heard Trunks.

"You've found me." The smirk deepened, becoming at once both cruel and eager. "But you're a long way from celebrating your victory."

"We'll see about that." Hunter stanced, sunlight gleaming off the ebon armor. For a moment nothing stirred but the breeze. Then Vegeta charged in, one fist cocking up and back for the first blow. Hunter's hand snapped out with equal speed to clasp Vegeta's wrist, and the air cracked with a discharge of energy. Vegeta bellowed in surprise and pain, snarling as the electricity poured through him.

"PAPA!" Trunks yelled, shooting forward. Gohan grabbed for him, snagging the back of the younger warrior's jacket. "Trunks, NO!" he shouted. "You'll only give Hunter something to use against Vegeta-san!"

"Gohan-san, let me go! Let GO!" Trunks strained against the grasp. The fabric of his jacket parted and he flew in, slamming a kick at Hunter's head. Again Hunter matched the Saiyajin speed, his free hand grasping Trunks' ankle and sending a charge through the boy as well before whipping Trunks like a rag doll down towards the ground, hard. The sound of his impact echoed over the plains like distant thunder.

Juu and Gohan exchanged glances, then raced up and outward in opposite arcs, coming around to strike at Hunter from opposite sides. Releasing Vegeta temporarily, Hunter extended both arms, whipstrands of metal extruding from the palms to catch each of them in a web. "I'm really not enjoying this," Hunter said as power surged along the threads, jolting the pair. "Why don't you three run along and let me finish my business with Vegeta? It'd be a lot less painful."

"Y-you c-can't have V-Vegeta-san," Gohan gasped, convulsing. On the other side, Juuhachi-gou trembled and grew still, face going blank as the current forced her systems into a protective shut-down.

"Don't interfere, wampaku-kozo," Vegeta growled, firing a ki bolt. "Go home and take my son and the jinzouningyo with you."

"Your son..." Hunter's head turned to consider Trunks, who was already launching himself into the air again. "I'll have to remember that. Could be useful."

"Bakayarou! Shiribachi!" Vegeta clenched one fist. "Your quarrel is with me, not with two children and a mannequin!"

Retracting the mesh around Gohan and Juuhachi-gou, Hunter nodded once. "You're absolutely right."

And reached for him.

Gokou leaned on the windowsill and watched the leaves flutter in the day's breezes. Behind him, ChiChi slept on. So tiny in their big bed, she was. He shook his head, putting the thought away before it sparked another burst of irritation. Not that he thought it would; he was over that now, Vegeta had only been trying to be nice to him, he knew that now.

But at the time he'd been so angry. And that just wasn't like him!

Saiyajin's strength is his rage. Vegeta's angry all the time. Raditz too, what I saw of him. Am... Am I becoming like that too? Did Bardock wake that up in me, that all the time being furious with the whole world? Aa, I don't want that! I just want to be plain me, Gokou.

_ (We are the bringers of death and fear. Accept your heritage, Kakarott!)_

_ _ Gokou shook his head again, harder this time_. No. I'm not like that. I won't be... I can't be like that...can I?_ One hand ran into his hair, fisting on the black locks and tugging hard as his thoughts chased themselves round and round. Finally, with a little groan, he let his hand drop and lifted them both to the ceiling, palms up, closed his eyes.

This was his secret, and he'd shared it with no one; not because he felt he needed to keep it, but because no one had ever bothered to ask. If they had, Gokou would cheerfully have admitted that when he was troubled he would put out his hands and touch the world's ki, just as if he was summoning the Genki Dama. In order to do that, he had to be at peace with himself, and reaching that state always cleared his thoughts.

A few faint sparks of light drifted up from everywhere and nowhere, setting Gokou's aura alight as he let himself pass down into that quiet place inside him, where the voice of the Earth was a clear, warm song in his heart and soul. He was the ocean, rolling to the shore, and each of the animals in it, from greatest to smallest; he was the wind, and the birds and insects that soared in its embrace. He was the oldest tree in the forest, roots spread deep in the soil and leaves lifted to the sun; he was the mountain at whose base that forest lay; he was--

Pain and rage, fading, familiar, and triumph, strange, and the feel of Gohan, and_ oh, Tousan, we need you--

_ _ Gokou's eyes snapped open. The first two fingers of his right hand slammed instinctively to his forehead and he teleported, sunlight bursting in on him as he emerged mid-air in the middle of a battle.

One glance told him things were bad. On the ground: Piccolo and Juuhachi-gou, neither moving. In the air to his side: Gohan and Trunks, neither very steady. In front of him: a great hulking form wrapped in metal, and in its relentless grip Vegeta, gasping and twitching as electricity poured through him, burning out his life.

"What the--" The voice was hollow and echoing, but the surprise couldn't be mistaken. Very slightly the stranger's grip relaxed, and that was all Gokou needed. His aura flared like flame as he shot forward, fists extended. "KAIOWUUU-KEN!"

"_Tousan_! DON'T TOUCH HIM!" Gohan shouted, but Gokou's fists were already slamming into the armored figure. Instantly the stranger grabbed at him as the impact drove them all three backwards,

lightning arcing around the limb, obviously meaning to treat Gokou the same as Vegeta. But off balance from the strike, the hand missed its grip, and Gokou's hand didn't. He grabbed the attacker's other wrist and wrenched it free of Vegeta, who dropped like a stone. Doubling his legs up between them, Gokou kicked out/thrust off from the metal-plated chest like a springboard, driving the invader further back as he himself changed direction and flew down to catch Vegeta. "Gohan! Karin's! NOW!"

"_Demo_--" Gohan stopped himself. No time for questions, only trust. "_Hai, Tousan_! --Trunks-kun, help me. You take Juu-san, I'll get Piccolo-san."

"Hai." Trunks looked back, watching as Gokou shot up and away, the Hunter in hot pursuit. "I hope Gokou-san has an idea..."

"I know he does." Gohan laughed briefly. "I just don't know what it is."

Above, Gokou glanced back, measuring his pursuer's pace. Too fast. He put on a burst of speed, extending the distance between them--though not by much.

"Give it up, whoever you are," the hollow voice called. "Listen, this flying, it's really impressive, but you've got to be expending energy to do it. I'm not. I can keep this up without effort. You're going to tire out eventually. Just give me Prince Vegeta and we can all go home happy."

"_Sumimaisen!_ Can't do that," Gokou called back cheerily. "If I let you take Vegeta, who's going to beat me up every morning? I don't have good day unless I get a regular spar!"

"Are you some kind of idiot?!-- Waaaait a minute, wait.... Your name wouldn't happen to be 'Gokou', would it?"

"_Hai_, that's me!" Gokou looked back again and saw that Gohan and Trunks were well out of sight with their 'passengers'. He slowed, turning to face the oncoming Hunter. "And I got one thing to say to you. _Anou_... really it's two, but I don't count so good, you know?"

"What's that?"

"Bai bai!" Reaching up, Gokou touched his forehead. "Shuken Idou!"

As he disappeared with Vegeta, Gokou was sure he heard the stranger mutter, "Must be Thursday. I could never get the hang of Thursdays."

Part Three

> "A Place in the Stars" <p>

_ But there's a smile on my face for everyone
> There's a golden coin that reflects the sun
 There's a lonely place that's always cold
> There's a place in the stars for when you get old_

— "How is he?"

Trunks checked his father's pulse. "Weak, but steady."

"Pity this year's crop isn't fully ripened yet." Karin paced a bit closer, whiskers twitching thoughtfully. "Another week or two and I might have had some senzou ready."

"_Nanimo_, Karin-san." Gohan bowed his head a bit. "Just being able to rest here a while is help enough."

Turning, Trunks moved to the other motionless form, knelt to take a blond head into his lap. "Juu-hachi-gou," he whispered, brushing a few wisps of hair from her face. "Wake up now... please wake up."

The Jinzouningen didn't stir. She wasn't breathing, and familiar with her ki as he was, Trunks could barely feel it at all. In some corner of his heart lay a cold fear that what he did feel was only wishful thinking.

"Damnit." Piccolo paced to the edge of the Tower, leaned over it and glared at the world below. "We came out of that fight with our butts whipped. What the hell was that thing anyway?"

"It--he--called himself 'Hunter', Piccolo-san," Trunks answered, still watching Juu's face for any signs of waking. "He said he was here for Papa. He's a bounty hunter."

"Bounty-?" Piccolo blinked, then smirked. "So the Vegetable's past is finally catching up with him."

"_Damare! Baka mitai!_ It's not funny!" Trunks caught himself, bit back the anger, bowed his head. "I...I'm sorry, Piccolo-san."

"Hm." The Namekseijin looked, if anything, more amused by Trunks' outburst than anything else. "Nice to see you've got some spark. I thought Bulma might've run all the fight out of you with that 'good manners' stuff of hers." His expression grew more serious. "Go on."

"Hunter has some kind of, I don't know... energy reflection field? Mom would be more likely to know. She's the scientist in these parts."

"_Hai_," Gohan agreed, nodding. "And it's not just any energy it's set for; it's ki energy. I hit Hunter with a kamehameha and he just shrugged it off."

"Makanko Sappou too." Piccolo's scowl deepened. "Well, that's just peachy keen. Especially considering that electric shock trick of his. That's how he got me--when I closed with him, he zapped the green right out of me."

"Yeah, you look a little paler than usual," Gokou said, earning himself a glare. "So, what you're saying, we can't hit him with our hands and we can't blast him? That's going to make fighting pretty one-sided."

"Tell us about it, Monkey Boy." Piccolo turned to face Gokou, arms

folded. "Now that you've covered the obvious, how about figuring out something NOT so obvious. How do we fight an enemy we can't touch and we can't shoot?"

"Throw things at him," Trunks suggested.

"He'd only dodge," Gohan countered. "He's as fast as we are in that armor."

"Hai...." Trunks shook his head a bit. "That armor. It's not like anything I've ever seen. I'd swear it reached out to grab my sword when I swung at him."

"I think it did, Trunks-kun. I think it's alive, somehow."

"Living armor?" Piccolo rolled his eyes. "Great. Now I've heard everything. Next you'll be telling me rocks talk."

"_Iie_, Piccolo-san, it could be," Gohan said, starting to pace. "Bulma-san told me about the possibility of something like this once.... We can't do it yet, our technology's not good enough, but what if the armor isn't really armor?" He stopped, looking at them all. "It's metal, that's true. But maybe it's metal filled with hundred of thousands, even millions, of microscopic robots, each programmed to work in unison, each one a tiny repair factory that can reshape the metal they're housed in almost instantly to adapt to whatever damage or environment they're in? Bulma-san called it 'nanite' technology. The armor can 'heal' and 'grow', just like it was a living thing. It can be whatever the Hunter needs it to be." He spread his hands. "This is alien science we're talking, we don't know how far advanced they are."

"Saaa...." Gokou's eyes turned thoughtful. "What you're saying, Gohan... this Hunter can change to defend against anything we throw at him, ne?"

Gohan looked at his father, a little surprised. "_Hai, Tou-san_. That's exactly the point I'm leading up to."

"Then every time we fight him he'll be able to protect against more of the things we can do. We'll have to hit him different way every attack." Gokou looked at them each in turn--Gohan, Trunks, Piccolo, then down to the fallen warriors. "We won't be able to keep up with that. We can't keep inventing new techniques blow after blow. So next time we fight Hunter has to be the last time, before he learns everything we can do."

Trunks opened his mouth to say something, but in that second Juuhachi-gou sat up. SPRANG up, taking a battle stance, eyes flickering around. Then she relaxed, bewilderment filling her features. "_Doko ni...?" she said. "_Murasakige_? What happened? Where's the Hunter?"

"Juu-chan..." Trunks got his feet, clasped her shoulders, a wave of relief washing through him. "This is Karin's Tower. It's near the Tenkai. Gokou-san sent us here after the fight with the Hunter went badly. You and Piccolo were down... do you remember that?"

The Jinzouningen's brow creased faintly and she reached up, swept back her hair slowly as she thought. "I... _hai_. Yes. I think I do."

Gohan-san and I flew in after the Hunter got hold of you... my systems must've shut down to avoid burnout when the electrical current hit." She looked at Trunks, then very hesitantly touched his face. "I... worried you?"

"You bet you did." Trunks swept her into his arms, burying his face in her hair. Juu closed her eyes and put her arms around him as well, leaning into the embrace.

"Okay lovebirds, knock it off." Piccolo swept an arm out, indicating the planet below. "We've got a problem to handle. Time for playing Romeo and Juliet later."

"Spoilsport." Nonetheless, Juu took a minute to touch Trunks' face again, then stepped back and put her hands on her hips, looking down at Vegeta. "I'd say our first priority is to get him back to Capsule Corporation and into a regen tank."

"_Hai_," Gokou agreed. "I better do that. I can go and be back before Hunter knows I'm around." Carefully Gokou hefted Vegeta to his shoulder, steadyng him with one hand.

"Be careful, _Tou-san_," Gohan warned. "This Hunter won't stop at killing us to get at Vegeta."

"I know. Shinpai shinai, Gohan-kun. Don't worry so, okay? I'm not ready to be dead again just yet." Lifting his free hand. Gokou touched his forehead and vanished.

"Well, that takes care of Vegeta for a bit." Juu paced to the edge of the Tower and looked down at the clouds below. "Wish it was that easy taking care of the Hunter."

"So do I." Trunks joined her, leaning on the stone balustrade.

"This bothers you."

"This bothers me a lot." Trunks glanced up, lavender bangs framing his face. "I'm used to the idea of my father being... someone that hasn't always been, and still isn't always, a very nice man. I can't deny the fact that he's killed before... sometimes simply because it suited him to do so. But he's still my father, and... and I--"

"You love him. That's no surprise. It would take a blind man locked in a box on the next continent to miss that, Trunks." Juu swept back her hair. "I think the same goes back. What good there is in Vegeta grew there and lives there because of your mother and you, and how much he's devoted to each of you, in his own Saiyajin princely way. He has become a different man than the one the Hunter's after, but I don't think that's going to make a lot of difference. Bounty hunters are not the most sympathetic people you'll ever meet. And whoever Hunter's working for will be even less likely to listen. They wanted vengeance, and Hunter is their chosen weapon. Might as well try to shut off the sun with sweet words."

"But what good will it do to destroy our lives too? Who will it bring back?" Trunks stood up. "It's all past now, and doesn't everyone deserve a second chance?"

Juuhashi-gou shook her head. "You're asking the wrong person. If I had those kinds of answers, I'd be Kami-sama."

"Don't think the brat has all the answers either," Piccolo commented from the other side of the platform. "Nobody does. In this life, we all find our own answers." He sighed. "And that debate--how right or wrong it is to take a life to pay for lives taken--is one that's gonna go on long after we're all permanent residents of Heaven. No use turning this into a philosophical debate. Put it aside, kid." His voice was almost kind. "Let's just concentrate on keeping your dad alive."

"_Hai,_ Piccolo-san." Trunks glanced back over the side. "I just wish I knew what the Hunter was up to..."

Something was wrong. Not just amiss, but terribly wrong.

Regaining her youth hadn't affected Bulma's mind (well, at least not the wealth of her experience). She stood in the open doorway, looking up at overcast sky. It was going to rain again this afternoon; lightning flickered restlessly, without sound, across the dark-bottomed clouds. The air was heavy with the promise of the coming storm.

Bulma felt like that inside too, and it wasn't just because of the weather. Something was building just out of perception's reach, something she could almost touch, and she knew with a soul-deep conviction that it wasn't going to bring any joy to their troubled world.

"Bulma! Bulma-_san!_ _Hayaku hayaku!_"

"So-Son-_kun_?!" Bulma turned around; Gokou's frantic shout had come from inside Capsule Corporation. She rushed down the hall to the infirmary. "Are you hurt? What's going on? I--"

She stopped dead in her tracks just inside the room. Gokou stood there, cradling a limp and battered form in his arms.

Bulma gasped; she felt her knees go weak, but she managed to keep her feet. "Ve...Vegeta...!" She swallowed hard. "Nande-koto-wa...?! Never mind! Bring him!"

Minutes later, Vegeta lay in the regeneration tank, which hummed softly to itself as it restored his tortured body. Bulma rested a hand on the transparent surface for a moment, looking at the too-still face of the man she loved. Then she turned to Gokou. "Son-_kun_...tell me."

Gokou was grim-faced as she'd seldom seen him. The sparkle of mischief and merriment that always shone just behind his eyes even in battle seemed to have completely deserted him now. "Hunter," he said.

She blinked. "Huh?"

"That's what he calls himself. He's some kind of intergalactic

policeman or something. He says he's been hired carry out justice against Vegeta for all the bad things he did before he came here."

This time Bulma had to grab the handle of the regen tank to keep from sitting down hard on the floor. "_Osoroshii yo...._" She looked back over her shoulder to Vegeta's still face. Even in repose, his face was set in a more or less permanent scowl. She knew what kind of monster Vegeta had been when he first arrived on Earth--how he'd laid waste to the warriors who'd dared oppose his plans to destroy the planet...all except Gokou. How he'd only given them aid against Freeza to serve his own interests. How he'd only stayed on Earth afterwards because he was determined to one day best 'Kakarott', and besides, he felt no inclination to move on.

"But he's changed," she said softly. "He has, whether he admits it or not."

"Sou," Gokou said softly. "But somehow I don't think Hunter's going to listen if we try to tell him. He don't seem too bright, you know?"

Videl noticed the gathered crowd first. The sight brought back memories of her first encounter with the restored Juuhachi-gou; despite the twinges that brought to her stomach, she found herself trotting over to see what the commotion was about.

When she got her first good look at the imposing armor-clad form, she stopped wide-eyed. It had to be an alien; what else could it be? Yet it clearly wasn't a Saiyajin, their armor didn't look like that.

While she was still wondering, the armored figure showed its hand, palm up, and a tiny image flickered into view, doll-sized, but very lifelike. Videl had to lean forward, craning her head over those in front of her to get a good look. She gasped when she recognized the face of the tiny image. That's Trunks' father! What--?

__ The little shopkeeper, Kozou, nodded once and pointed towards Capsule Corporation.

"No!!" Videl shouted, but it was too late. The armored alien turned and took off, kicking up dust and leaving a crowd of coughing people in its wake.

"Baka!!!" Videl knew instinctively that the huge dark figure wasn't here to pay a social call. She raced for the borrowed skycar, jumped in and took off. She floored the accelerator, but the stranger had already dwindled to a black speck against the stormy sky. She'd never get there ahead of--of whoever it was.

She fumbled on the dashboard for her cell phone and punched the memory button. "Please," she whispered, "please, Gohan-san, please have kept the phone with you..."

Hmeep! Hmeep!

__ All eyes turned to Gohan. He stood there for a moment with a look of blank surprise on his face, making him so resemble his father that someone might have laughed had the situation not been so grim. Then he reached into his sash and pulled out a tiny box. He flipped open the receiver and raised it to his ear. "Ah..._moshi-moshi?_"

"Since when do you carry a beeper, kid?" Piccolo muttered.

Gohan's eyes went wide. "Videl-_san_! You--_nani?!" You saw--?
When--? Yes, I--he _what?!" No, no, Videl, don't go near that place.
Go home. I'll--I'll call you later. _Yakusoku._ I promise. _Jaa._"

Gohan closed the cell phone with a click and surveyed the group with grim, troubled eyes.

"The Hunter," he intoned. "He's on his way to Capsule Corporation."

Part Four

> "It's Just Another Day"<p>

_ There's razors in my bed that come out late at night
> They always disappear before the morning light
 I'm dreaming again of life underground
> It doesn't ever move, it doesn't make a sound
 And just when I think that things are in their place
> The heavens are secure, the whole thing explodes in my face_

_ It's just another
> Just another day..._

_ --Oingo Boingo, "Just Another Day"

In the relative quiet of the infirmary the dull **thud **sounded like the slam of a giant's fist on a door, setting the more delicate glassware jingling faintly.

"What the--" Bulma gasped, bolting up from her chair

"Hunter." Gokou's eyes opened slowly. "_Aaa, sore wa zannen da.... Ne_?"

"A pity? Why're you saying it's a pity?"

"I was hoping he wouldn't find this place so soon." Turning, Gokou put both hands on Bulma's shoulders. "Stay with Vegeta. Watch him. I'll make sure Hunter doesn't get down here to bother you."

"Son-kun..." Bulma looked up at the gently smiling face of her friend, then on impulse hugged him. "Don't die again, all right?"

"I'm not planning on it." Turning, Gokou flew up the corridors, turning to head out the partially ruined wall and circle around,

peering down. Yes, there was the Hunter, already making himself a doorway into the building. Briefly Gokou glanced to the north.

_*Gohan-kun*.

_*Tou-san??*

— — — *Hurry everyone along, okay? I'll keep Hunter busy till you get here*.

_*Demo, tou-san-!*

— — — *Gohan. Don't worry about me. I'll be okay.*

— — — *...Hai. ...Please, tou-san..? Please be okay?*

— — — *Hai.* Gaining a little more altitude, Gokou let himself drop, feet first, powering down so his ki was almost nonexistent. His full weight-- some 600-plus pounds, heritage of a race born with denser bones and tissues to stand up to the crushing gravity of Vegetasei--slammed into Hunter's back and knocked the armored figure to its knees.

"_Ossu!_" Gokou said cheerily, and slammed a fist down about where he thought the Hunter's kidneys might be, then rolled off and cartwheeled away to his feet as the armor lit up with an electrical charge.

"You again. Where's Prince Vegeta?"

"_Anou_.... Would you believe I forgot?"

"No." Turning, Hunter leveled an arm and fired a beam of crackling blue energy. Gokou darted out of its way and picked up a chunk of masonry, fired it like a fastball. The Hunter caught it and crushed it to dust, then began to walk forward. "Matter of fact, now that I find you here, I'm willing to bet he's somewhere inside that building. But until I put you out of business, you'll just pull that disappearing trick with him again. So you're the dish of the day."

"_Oya ma!_ Don't talk about food, you'll get me hungry."

"Maybe you should consider leaving to get yourself something to eat, then."

"Sankuu, I think I can last a little while longer."

"Your funeral, Gokou." Again the blue beam lanced out, this time a double shot. One passed so close Gokou could hear the air hiss at its passage like a nest of snakes as he dodged. Extending a palm, he returned fire, sending a rapid stream of small ki charges lancing in at Hunter. It almost certainly wouldn't harm him, but it would distract him-- Gokou swept around and came in from one side, letting his senses guide him.

Before his kick connected, an unyielding arm was there to block it.

This is not gonna be easy fight. Doubling up, Gokou put his hands to Hunter's shoulders, grabbing what handhold he could, and flipped

the massive figure into the framework of a nearby construction site even as the return shock numbed his hands and lower arms. Shaking them, Gokou glanced briefly down at his palms. They were reddened, as if he'd put his hands for a second into something hot enough to incinerate a human at once... and probably a Saiyajin too. Flying forward, he caught up a girder and swung it like a baseball bat as the Hunter emerged from a pile of shattered rock.

Instead of ducking, the Hunter caught the other end of the girder. "Bad move." The black armor flared blue-white and an arc of energy raced up the metal, slamming Gokou back. As he staggered to his feet, Hunter flung the girder at him like a javelin. It caught Gokou square in the chest and slammed him into one of the supports of the high-rise, bringing brick and mortar and rafters raining down to bury the Saiyajin beneath them.

"That was easier than I--" Hunter broke off as the helmet's sensors registered a rising power source under the tons of material. "What the... can't be. No one without a suit of battle armor could've--"

The rubble exploded upward as a figure shot skywards, aura flaring red as flame. "Kaiouuuuuu KENNNN!"

"...Ohhhhhh shhiiiiii--" the rest of the Hunter's remark was lost in an impact that sent shock waves rolling across the ground as Gokou rammed a shoulder into the metal chest, then pulled back and rained blows home so fast the armor's energy had barely time to sear his knuckles. Under the barrage the Hunter staggered backwards, off balance, a thin whine rising as the neuroservos of the suit raced to compensate. This is insane! No purely organic being could be this strong and this fast. But I'm not registering so much as a pacemaker on this guy! No wonder half the universe runs for cover when they hear the word 'Saiyajin'! --I can't waste any more time playing. The Brat Patrol has to be on the way, he's just buying time. Have to take Gokou down hard, then catch Vegeta unguarded._

_ _ As Gokou drew back for a final punch before backing off again, the Hunter's armor suddenly flared a bright white. Dazzled, Gokou threw up a hand to shield his eyes and felt something thin and cold wrap around it, around his arm, around his body--thousands of metal cables, drawn from the material of the Hunter's suit, encasing him in a web. With all his strength he reared back, trying to pull free before they finished entrapping him. Instead he simply lifted the Hunter off the ground with him.

"Look..." the Hunter's voice was quieter now, slower, regret plain past the hollow echos of the helmet. "There's no need for this. Just let me take care of Vegeta and I'll be out of here. What has he got on you, anyway? Why are you protecting him like this? Your son told me you helped drive Vegeta off once. You can't hold him in any kind of regard. Is he threatening to kill your wife or your parents or something?"

"_Iie._" Gokou twisted, still straining backwards. Tiny drops of blood sprang up where the wires were cutting into him here and there, staining the dark metal darker still. "He's changed. Besides, what right you've got to come and take a man's life on one side of what he's done? Isn't it better let him live to make up for bad he did before he knew better?"

"There's no making up for a thousand planets and more destroyed. No, Vegeta didn't take all those out himself, but the Saiyajin did. Someone has to be held accountable."

"The one who ordered all that is dead already!"

"Furiiza, you mean. I know all about the alliance the Saiyajin made with King Cold and his sons. But the Saiyajin could've backed out of that any time they wanted. They didn't. They liked being the destroyers of worlds. You, now... you seem a little different, somehow. In all honesty, I should probably take out every Saiyajin and half-Saiyajin I find here, just to be on the safe side, but the contract's only for Vegeta, and I'm willing to forget I ever found out about you. Just stop interfering."

"I can't... do that..." Gokou gasped as the cables tightened still more, holding him motionless. "Vegeta's... my friend."

"You've got lousy tastes in friends. Your pal is a killer without any mercy or compassion at all."

"He's... not like that inside...any more! He's... n.n.."

Hunter sighed. "I can't argue any longer. I want you to know...you've got a hell of a better heart than I have, if you can forgive Prince Vegeta and offer him a chance to change. But some people can't, and those are the people I'm working for. I wish this could be different, Gokou. You're probably the only nice guy I've ever met in this whole dirty business. I promise, I'll make sure Hunter Central issues some kind of compensation to your family, so they won't starve or anything."

Then the wires lit with arcs of electricity.

Even miles away, they all heard the scream.

Trunks gasped. "G...Gokou-san..."

Piccolo bared his teeth and swore. "The Hunter's got him."

Grim-faced, Gohan suddenly flared into Super Saiyajin and took off, the air cracking apart in a sonic boom as he put on speed. There was no gentleness left in his expression at all, only a fierce intensity-- and, perhaps, just the faintest trace of welcome. All his doubts dropped away. I'm born to this too, Piccolo-san, he thought. I'm my father's son as well as my mother's.

Tou-san, forgive me, I never understood. You live for peace as much as I do, and love it, but you know, you always knew, the other side of peace is war, and the fighting we do is like the storm, afterwards the earth's renewed and ready to live again... tears glittered from his eyes as Gohan pushed himself harder, not even hearing the others behind him as they called out, racing to catch up to him. How could I forget that? This is your gift inside me, to be able to protect the things I love, to be warrior and scholar both, I can be both, I CAN be--

___(You're a mystery to your dad, sometimes, Gohan, but it doesn't matter to him to understand everything you do or say or choose. All that really matters is that you're happy.)_

_ _ "I'm almost there, Tou-san, wait for me, _onegai_--"

White hot, searing, and a terrible feeling of choking as all the muscles locked shut, heart hammering and stumbling, struggling to keep an even beat as the power overrode everything and the pain became the world...

(one more one more moment gohan trunks and juu-san piccolo almost almost here more hunter wastes on me their better chance and i can't breathe it was like this then too my heart it hammered so aa vegeta sorry so sorry failed you)

_ _ Dark eyes snapped open.

(kakarott?...NO!)

_ _ Bulma shrieked a little and held up her hands as Vegeta rammed a fist through the plexiglass of the regen tank and flew out, aura flaring gold. "Vegeta! No! You're still not--"

Ignoring her, Vegeta turned and rocketed out into the hall, then straight up and out the roof. The crackle of energy drew his attention at once. The Hunter; Kakarott. No, not dying. Not yet... but Vegeta's nerves ached with the memory of that burning embrace, and it was enough to kill in time. All too short a time. Flattening a palm, Vegeta gathered his ki. "Super Vegeta no... BIG BANG ATTACK DA!"

The Hunter jerked and the faceless head turned, the cables beginning to retract, letting their prisoner drop free. Two slender forms darted in at once and snatched Gokou from the line of fire. In the same moment Vegeta heard a shout of rage: "MAASENNNK0000!"

As the Hunter, caught in the crossfire, plummeted, Gohan dropped to hover beside Vegeta. "He didn't bounce that one."

"Perhaps it takes a second to switch to defense when he's using the electrical field as an attack." Vegeta smiled, eyes narrowing down. "Or perhaps enough energy hitting at once can overload the reflection."

"Maybe. It's hard to hit him all at once when he moves as fast as we do."

"Then we have to move faster. Let's see if you can keep up, boy." Vegeta dove, opening up on the Hunter as he began to rise back into the air. Gohan fanned out to one side and added his own shots to the volley. A bit of motion glimpsed from the corner of one eye caught his attention, and his gaze flickered that way a second to mark Piccolo taking up a position, light flaring around his hand as he summoned the Makanko Sappou.

Some distance away, Trunks looked at Juuhachi-gou. "Can you watch

Gokou-san?"

The Jinzouningen nodded. "Better if I don't get too close, hm? Besides which, if I have to beat a fast retreat with Gokou, I don't get tired either. I can outrun the Hunter better than any of the rest of you."

"_Hai._"

"_Murasakige?_"

"Nn?" Trunks paused.

"Don't YOU get too close either. I'm not going to be the one to explain to Bulma why her only son got flash-fried."

"I won't, Juu-chan." Trunks flew forward, studying the arrangement of the others, then dropped down and to one side, so that when he fired it would run no risk of hitting the other three. That his position just happened to be near his father... well, that was just luck, now wasn't it? He spared Vegeta only a glance before powering up, but that was enough_. Papa isn't doing well. He can't have had more than a half hour in the regen tank, if that long. How does he keep fighting?_

_ _ _ *If you have time to ask stupid questions like that, you have time to get your tail in gear and fight.*_ There was a certain wry amusement in the mind-voice_. *Damn, did you get your mother's tendency to run off at the mouth as well as that absurd haircolor?*_

_ _ Trunks chuckled. *_Sorry, Papa.*_

_ _ _ *Hn. Be sorry later. Shoot this yarou now._*

Trunks grinned and raised his hands. "Final...."

_ *_...Nani? Why you little thief.*_ But the words carried a quick burst of pride, hastily hidden.

"...FLASH!"

Juu-hachi-gou watched the fireworks and shook her head slowly. Sometimes it truly helped to have senses more acute than human, and now was one of those times. They were keeping the Hunter off balance, yes. But very little, if any, of their shots were doing any real damage. If they could keep it at the same level, they might well punch through eventually. But how long could the four of them keep up the same intensity of firepower?

"Nnnn...."

"Hm? --Ahh. Welcome back, Gokou-san. How do you feel?"

"...I'll never eat _ise-ebi_ again." A low laugh.

"I'm sure all the lobsters in the oceans will fall down in eternal gratitude that they're off your list of edibles." Juu shifted. "It's not going well."

Gokou blinked, forced himself to focus on the battle. Every muscle ached with its own separate variety of discomfort, and his thoughts were hard to marshal, but it wasn't hard to see what Juu meant. "It's not getting to him.... Shimatta..."

"No, and Piccolo and Vegeta are still not fully recovered."

"Why you're not helping?"

"Because if I joined the fight, there would be nothing holding your butt up but the air, and you're a little heavy for a balloon, Gokou-san."

"Hai.... Chotto." Gokou put his fingers to his mouth and whistled. It wasn't as loud as normal, but the effect was the same; seconds later a small gold speck resolved itself into a shimmering cloud that came to a stop right beside them. With a smile Gokou rolled out of Juu's arms and onto it, patting it as one might an especially well-loved and faithful pet. "Kintoen," he murmured. "Now you can go, Juuhachi-chan."

"You're sure you'll be okay?"

"Un." Gokou nodded, sitting up. "See, I'm already feeling better."

As she flew off and took up a stance near Trunks, Gokou wiped a hand across his brow. He was recovering, but too slow to be of use now, already the Hunter was starting to recover. He'll go for Vegeta first, it doesn't care who else is here. If only there was some way--hn? Shading his eyes, Gokou peered closely at the Hunter's back. He hadn't really noticed it before, but there was an odd shape, almost a lump, in the lower back area, almost where Gokou'd punched him earlier. As the Hunter shifted, Gokou could see that bump, or hump, or whatever, lighting up in different areas, and the areas seemed to correspond to what side was being hit hardest at the moment. Could that be his battery? And it lights when they hit him-- the Saiyajin's eyes widened. Sugei! It lights! That's where his power comes from! When one hits him, he uses their energy to ward off next hit, or shock us with. If we could break that--but how're gonna touch him?

About that time something whacked Gokou in the head and bounced off into his lap. Rubbing his hair (it hadn't hurt, really, just been a little unexpected) Gokou looked up at the clear and empty sky, then down at what was lying across his knees.

A bo staff, made of some reddish wood, polished till the wood felt like purest satin. His eyes got wider yet, and one hand stole gently out to touch the surface, curl around the shaft, test the weight of it. The perfect and familiar balance of it.

Wood--hadn't that been in one of Gohan's lessons, a long time ago, something about wood and electricity...?

Standing, Gokou steadied himself. "Kintoen! Let's go!" Shooting forward, he headed straight in at the Hunter. As the armored figure turned to face this new challenge, Gokou drew back one fist-- and flung the staff straight over the Hunter's shoulder at Gohan. "Gohan! Catch!"

"_Nani_?" Instinctively Gohan put out a hand and grabbed the staff, blinked at it. "_Ara_! Tou-san! This is the--"

"Don't talk, Gohan! Use it!!! Hit that bubble thingie in his back! _Hayaku_!"

"_Hai_!" Leveling the stick at the Hunter's back, Gohan shouted, "_NYOI BO! NOBASU!_"

Faster than the eye could follow the shaft lengthened, shooting out to ram into the Hunter's back. An ordinary staff might've shattered--

But the Nyoibo was unbreakable.

And the armor wasn't.

The Hunter screamed, piercingly, as the strike shattered open the metal 'blister' on the back of the armor, revealing an array of crystals. The heavily-armored figure dropped like a rock, barely managing to halt the heartstopping fall before striking the earth, then collapsed to hands and knees as the armor began to shift and ripple and melt off into a dark silver puddle around him--

Around **her.**

*** "_Nanda??_" Trunks shook his head. "The Hunter is--"

"Is a girl," Juuhachi-gou finished.

One by one the warriors dropped to the earth as well, ringing the Hunter, who watched them quietly. "Not bad," she said softly, in a clear, sweet voice. "First time that's ever happened. What the hell is that thing anyway?"

"Nyoibo." Gohan held it out to Gokou, who started to put it in its sheath across his back before he remembered he wasn't wearing the sheath, and finally settled for leaning on it. "It's a magic unbreakable staff."

"Magic. Right." Hunter stood up, looking down at the puddle around her feet which was already drawing up and jelling to one side. "That's going to take a while to regenerate. You should have plenty of time to finish me off."

"Who wants to kill you?" Gokou asked, puzzled, then blinked at the two sets of hands that went up almost in unison. "Come on, Vegeta, Piccolo! She's just little girl!"

"A little girl that damn near sent you straight back to plague Kaiou-sama again," snarled Vegeta. "That might not've been so bad, but I resent the fact she tried to do the same to me."

"He's got a point, Gokou." Piccolo folded his arms. "Inside that armor, Hunter's a match for us all. I don't think 'make nicey' is going to work this time either."

"Trunks! Vegeta! Son-kun!" Bulma came pounding up, skidded to a stop, and stared, first at the lump of liquid metal, then at the Hunter.

"**She's** been causing all this trouble?!"

"That's nothing new, look at how much trouble **you** can be without any technology at all," Vegeta shot back.

"The Namekseijin's right," Hunter said unexpectedly, as Bulma stuck her tongue out at Vegeta. "As soon as my bio-armor repairs itself, I'll be right back after him--" she nodded at Vegeta. "So you might as well kill me now. Though I warn you, Hunter Central will only send another Hunter, and this one will be even better armored. Once we accept a contract, we don't stop until we get results. In this case, I have to have incontrovertible proof that Prince Vegeta of the Saiyajin is dead."

Silence.

"That's...pretty hard to do, considering..." Juu began.

"Not at all." Bulma's face was set in a sudden bleak expression.

Trunks glanced at his mother, startled. "Mom?"

Stepping forward, not answering, Bulma faced the Hunter. "If I can offer you that kind of proof, will you leave us in peace, and tell any other bounty hunters to do the same?"

"Sure. That's standard operating practice, to spread the word that the contract's been filled. But it'd better be some pretty good proof, considering he looks pretty lively right now."

"All right. We'll wait till your armor's back up. I guess you have some way of recording and testing any... proof... I offer you in there, once it's functional?"

"I do. And it's not something you're going to be able to fool."

Bulma drew a long, ragged breath. "I won't have anything to tell you but the truth."

They were seven, all in a row. Seven stones, each carved with its own name and number. The willow trees hung low over them, there by the stream, and the wind in the branches was the sound of ocean waves.

"I made these," Bulma said in a soft, almost toneless voice. "By myself. At first I didn't ask Gohan's help because... well, I suppose it was my way of saying goodbye. Something I felt I had to do. Later on I felt Trunks didn't need to know. Life was hard enough without dwelling on everyone we'd lost. I thought... the peace of the place... might be the best apology I could make, for going on living when--" she stopped, lowered her head.

Gokou walked up to one stone, knelt by it, fingers tracing the katakana etched in its surface. "Ku...Kuririn," he sounded out. "And..."

"Yamucha," Gohan said, stepping up as well. "Tenshinhan... Pi--" he stopped, swallowed hard. "Piccolo." At the next marker, he simply dropped to his knees, looked at the name, then looked over at his father wordlessly.

Juuhachi-gou's face went suddenly flat, a blank non-expression, and she quickly turned away, wrapping her arms around herself.

"Son Gokou," Trunks took up. "Son...Go-Gohan. And..." he stopped, puzzled. "Mom... this isn't katakana..."

"No." Bulma knelt by the last stone. "This was the hard one. I had to wait a few years till I'd... I'd deciphered enough of the language to be sure what I wrote was correct. It says--"

"It says 'Vegeta, Prince of the Saiyajin'." Vegeta walked over to stare down at the gravestone.

Bulma turned to the Hunter, clad once again in the dark armor. "If you scan, you'll find the remains of a body here," she said, voice calm, although her face was pale, almost white. "You'll find it's Saiyajin... and if you have any record of Vegeta's DNA structure, you'll find it's a perfect match. This is the final resting place of the Prince of the Saiyajin."

Hunter stepped forward, looked down at the grave for a long moment. "Impossible," she said finally. "How?"

Bulma waved a hand at Vegeta. "This... is a clone. I grew him, and these others, in my laboratory. They're all clones of the original Saiyajin. Only Trunks and I survived the holocaust."

Hunter's head swivelled up to stare at Vegeta. "So this isn't the real Vegeta?"

"_Nande kuso_?" snarled Vegeta, one fist clenching. "Of course I'm--" the rest of his remark was shut off by several pairs of hands clapping over his mouth.

As Gokou and Gohan wrestled with Vegeta, Bulma stood, dusting her knees. "Well, as you see, he certainly thinks he is."

Hunter laughed shortly. "I'd say you did a bit too good a job on creating his memory pattern." She looked down again at the grave. "Well, this is good enough. You were right, it's a perfect match. And, now that I compare them, this one's a few years too young." She jerked her head at the furious figure now being sat on to keep him quiet. "He's only, what, a few months old? A year at most?"

"About that. My! Your scans can determine that?"

"Cloning isn't a new technology. It is surprising to find it here, I didn't think this world's science was quite that developed. You must be something of a genius."

"Why thank you." Bulma gave Vegeta a little triumphant look. "It's so nice to have someone appreciate me for the brilliant (and beautiful) girl I am."

"Then you'll be going?" Piccolo asked (not without a certain amount

of disappointment).

"Yeah. Data transmission's already taken place. By the end of the month every hunter and law enforcement agency in the galaxy will have the update." Turning, Hunter nodded to each of them in turn. "For what it's worth... I wish you peace." Without another word, she looked up to the darkening sky and took off, kicking up small spits of dust that drifted over the small, quiet gravesite in pale drifts.

Juuhachi-gou didn't look back at the sound of Hunter's departure. She began to walk slowly away from the group, the wind stirring her pale, silken hair, blowing drifts into her eyes she didn't bother to tuck back into place. So wrapped up was she in her own dismal thoughts that she didn't sense movement behind her until a strong arm encircled her shoulders. Juu then did a strangely human thing--she jumped. Wide-eyed, she turned to look into a young, severe face that wore an oddly gentle expression. "To-Trunks?"

He smiled gently. "Why don't we go for a walk?" he suggested. "I think we have a lot to talk about."

She started to protest, then discovered she didn't want to. She sighed and smiled, nodded. When he drew her close to his side, she rested her head on his shoulder and slipped her arm around his waist. Unnoticed, they quietly walked away together.

"Bye-bye!" Gokou shouted, cheerily waving at the disappearing speck of the Hunter. "Come back and visit sometime!" Then his face stiffened, just before he let out a piercing scream and fell over. "ITAI!!!! MY TAILLLL! VEGEEETAAA!"

== END ==

Ossu! Ora Gokou! Next time on Dragon Ball Supaa Zed, someone's killing the Dragons! ALL the worlds everywhere! "Hey, who are you? Why you want to do that?? And Trunks takes a Mystery Tour in the Time Machine! "WHAT did you say your name was, GOTEN?? And who is the HYPER Saiyajin? It's our Anniversary Special, where the worlds of Dragon Ball Z and Dragon Ball Super Z collide, in "Walking On the Sun", our fourth Supaa Zed story! Bai bai, minna!

End
file.